

There's a Better Way to Manage Time Management

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For many people, it feels as if we have more to do and less time to do it in than ever before: children need to be fed, bosses need you to stay late, and someone needs to get the car to the mechanic. Juggling all of our responsibilities can make it feel as though there just isn't enough time in the day to accomplish everything.

To wrangle our crunched calendars, we turn to “productivity hacks” and the newest time-saving apps, but new research suggests that maybe we would be better off spending some time managing our time management.

In a recent study, a team led by APS Fellow Gabriele Oettingen (New York University) examined the psychological strategies that actually help people effectively manage their time. Where lifehacks and calendar apps fail, a strategy called MCII — mental contrasting with implementation intentions — may be a better choice for helping overloaded employees who are looking to get a handle on their time management.

In mental contrasting, the researchers explain, individuals first imagine the positive events they want to occur in the future, such as acing a presentation for the board or getting a promotion. Then, they visualize what's currently holding them back from achieving these goals (i.e., writing out a new business proposal or learning Excel). Contrasting the best possible outcome with the current reality reveals how various obstacles and time commitments get in the way of accomplishing our professional goals.

“However, sometimes people encounter particularly hard obstacles. Planning in advance how one wants to deal with these challenges is an effective remedy,” Oettingen and colleagues explain.

When obstacles do pop up, MCII directs people to make a concrete action plan in the form of, “If I face situation X, then I will perform goal-directed response Y!”

In one experiment, the researchers recruited a group of 58 low-income working adult women from a business education training program. These women faced enormous challenges in managing their time with juggling childcare, jobs, and making it to class. Half the women were assigned to a control group and half received MCII training, described as a “study skills” class. Over 12 weeks, participants met for classes taught by a trained interventionist.

In the MCII condition, participants completed an exercise called WOOP: identify a *Wish*, think about the best *Outcome*, think about an *Obstacle* to reaching it, and make an if-then *Plan* to deal with the obstacle. Participants were asked to perform this exercise at least once daily and were given a diary notebook to record their goals.

Women in the control group also learned about an exercise called WOOP, but this exercise required them to think about: being *Wise*, *Optimistic*, *Open-minded*, and *Powerful*. Just like the MCII group, they were instructed to visualize the aspects of their lives that fit these steps and write it down in a daily diary.

To calculate how well the intervention worked at helping people manage their time, the researchers looked at how many days of class each participant missed.

On average, having more children and more work hours meant that participants attended fewer classes. But the results showed that MCII training had the most beneficial effects for the women who were the most strapped for time (those who had more children and longer hours). These women missed significantly fewer days of class when they practiced the MCII training compared to the control training—a sign that the training really was helping them manage their time more efficiently.

“The present research suggests that MCII is a time- and cost-effective self-regulation strategy that people can use by themselves in order to remedy their time management and thus improve their everyday life and long-term development,” the researchers conclude.

Reference

Oettingen, G., Kappes, H. B., Guttentag, K. B., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (2015). Self-regulation of time management: Mental contrasting with implementation intentions. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(2), 218-229. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2090